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Informational Field of Proper Names in Mythology and Folklore

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Abstract

This paper applies an interdisciplinary approach for proper names analysis using linguistic, folklore and culture data. Proper names (personal and geographical) reveal lingual and cultural information adding specific meaning to mythological and folklore texts. This statement is illustrated by examples of different peoples: Anglo-Saxons, Siberian and American natives. Common features of proper names will be explained by their universal function.

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1. Introduction

This paper focuses on proper names in mythology and folklore. We investigate what information is provided by proper names. We claim that proper names are barriers of important information: they can contribute to better understanding of historical events, society, time, location and categorical distribution. Proper names will be observed from semantic, cultural and social angles. First, we establish differences between mythology and folklore; then we verify differences between common nouns and proper names; and finally we analyze examples from different cultures to see if there are commonalities in proper names' functions and in informational field that proper names provide.

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2. Methodology and research

2.1. *Mythology versus folklore*

Mythology is the first form of collective consciousness, a part of world picture in which elements of religion, arts, science, social, and subsistence practice are integrated. Folklore is the first collective creative work (oral language, music, drama, choreography). The roots of folklore are in mythology and therefore folklore is a secondary, later phenomenon. The main difference between mythology and folklore lies in the notion that a myth is knowledge about the world, society and religion (people usually believe in myths) but folklore is fine literature, in which it may be hard to believe. Mythology and folklore also have common features: they both are collective creation. Folklore contains mythological elements (Mechkovskaya, 1998). Many myths are so old that they are no longer even understood within their original context, but have penetrated into folklore as its components, combinations, metamorphoses and metaphors. Thus, there is not a sharp border between myths and folklore works, especially among hunting and gathering societies without writing traditions

2.2. *Common nouns versus proper names*

All nouns can be categorized into one of two groups: common nouns and proper nouns. Everything we can see or discuss is represented by a word that names it. This word is a common noun that is used for a class of persons, places, or things. Every common noun can be categorized as at least one of following types: abstract, collective, compound, concrete, countable, non-countable, verbal, or gender specific. Common nouns are frequently used as components of proper names.

A proper noun is the name given to something to make it more specific (e.g., Patrick, Alaska, June). Current linguistics makes a distinction between proper nouns and proper names; but this distinction is not universally observed. When the distinction is made, proper nouns are limited to single words only (in English possibly with the), while proper names include all proper nouns (in their primary applications) as well as noun phrases such as Northern Ireland, South Carolina, the Tower of London and so on. In this paper, the term proper name is used because personages and geographical objects of mythology and folklore might include more than one noun. Unlike common nouns, whose function is to subsume particular specimens under a generic concept, a proper name merely serves to identify a person or object by singling it out from among similar items. Sometimes proper names are called simply names; but that term is often used more broadly. As V. Fromkin and R. Rodman (Fromkin & Rodman, 1998, p. 169) have stated, “proper names are different from most words in the language in that they refer to a specific object or entity, but usually have little meaning, or sense, beyond the power of referral.” We argue that on the stage of mythological and ancient folklore texts proper names have meaning as common nouns do. In mythological stories and folklore of North American and Siberian native people, there are not many proper names. Personages are usually verbalized by common nouns: people (people, man, father, chief, woman, girl, maiden, daughter, granny, baby, twin); animals (coyote, bear, skunk, mouse, beaver, horse); birds (raven, goose, wild duck, eagle); trees (spruce, cottonwood); insects (spider, fly, dragonfly); amphibious and water creatures (fish, salmon, clam, whale, frog, turtle); natural objects (moon, sun, star, cloud, rock); abstract and supernatural notions (sky, summer, fire, flood, thunder, wind, god, devil, monster, giant, ghost, voice, dragon); things and body parts (meatball, blood clot, bag, box, basket, pipe, blanket, flute, head, teeth) (Kalifornsky, 1991; Erdoes, 1984, 1998; Tuchkova, 2012; Kulemzin, 2006). Geographical objects are also often verbalized by general nouns like ‘ocean’, ‘river’, ‘lake’, ‘mountain’, ‘island’ and so on. This list can be continued because every culture has a broad variety of verbalization of heroes that are more or less universal.

Such proper names as surnames have developed in a comparatively modern period; for example, English surnames have spread after 1066 because of the introduction of Christianity, the increase of population and the expansion of government. According to linguistic research, personal names derived from the same sources across culturally unrelated languages: peoples’ occupations, personal characteristics, place names and geographical features, natural phenomena, superstitions, symbolic things, beliefs, particular occasions or events (Langendonck, 2008, p. 1–5; Mehdi, 2009). In mythological stories of Siberian and American natives such sources are lying on a surface.

2.3. Examples of personages' verbalization in mythology and folklore

In myths and mythological stories (ancient folklore works), proper names are rarely used. Personages and geographical objects are verbalized by common nouns; however, they are used in the function of proper names. In publications such names are capitalized as usual proper names. Since proper names haven't lost their connection with common names, it is possible to apply categorization to such names.

People (anthropomorphic personages) could be characterized by linguistic means (usually contain a noun of anthropomorphic semantics, like 'people,' 'person,' 'man' and so on) and accompanied by cultural description:

Anglo-Saxon:

Generally, as elements of Anglo-Saxon names, nouns and sometimes adjectives were used (most of all this statement could be illustrated by proper names of the Old English period). The most frequent model of name formation was noun + noun. In the final position of such proper names, nouns that denoted "the doer of the action" were used; for example: -wulf (wulf-warrior), -beorn (warrior), -red (adviser), -wine (friend), -mund (protector) (Tarlanov, 2010, p. 144). Analyzing elements of men's names in Scandinavian mythology, three possible semantic groups could be distinguished: 1) courage, heroism; 2) war and all nouns that connected with this semantic field; 3) social status.

Examples of the first group (courage, heroism): Cen (brave), -mund/Ealmund (protector), -mer (famous). Examples of the second group (war): Cynwulf, Wulffric (warrior), Here (army), Ecg (sword, Excalibur), Ceol (war ship), Wig (battle), -gar (spear), -hild (battle), Sceld (shield, screen used for military purposes), -guth (war). Examples of the third group (social status): Frea (Lord, master), Ethel (noble), Cyn (noble relative or a relative from royal family), -laf (heir, heritage), -red (adviser, consultant, ruler), Pegn (servant). Speaking about names in Anglo-Saxon fairy tales, we can come to the conclusion that one of the most frequently used names was Jack [English Folk Tales, 2005]. Some research conducted by different linguists shows that usually this name denoted a person of simple, not noble origin (typically an inhabitant of some small village). But this name could become unique if some individualizing identifier were added (possible to add it in pre- and -post position), for example: Jack the Fool, Canny Jack, Jack the Robbler, Clever Jack, Daft Jack, Jack the Farmer, Lazy Jack, Jack the Giant-Killer (this fairy tale is based on the legend about a simple young boy who lived in King Arthur's times. He was famous for having killed the terrible Giant who ate many people from Cornwall) (English Fairy Tales, 2005).

North American:

Dena'ina Athabaskan - Dghilidnayi 'the Mountain people', their informational field includes social organization (they have a little village), physical characteristic (they are described as 'tiny people'), location (mountain), subsistence activity (they make fire, hunt, cook); *Nant'ina* 'the One who steals us', their informational field includes physical characteristics (they were described as human-like ones with a single eye on their forehead), social status (opposition to *Dena'ina* society), and functions (harming people by stealing them) (Kalifornsky, 1991, p. 33).

Siberian:

Selkup – Nenn'a 'Sister', Temn'a 'Brother', Ima 'Wife', Paja 'Granny', Qup 'Man', Ira 'Old Man', 'Husband', Wərqynäl'aty 'Elder Daughter' (Bykonina, 1996; Becker, 1978; Kuznetsova, 1993). Informational field in these examples is restricted to social description (kinship relation).

Khanty – Kirpñlöpimi 'Snotty nose woman' is a popular person in Khanty folklore, an ogre. Mos, Por- are the names of Khanty moieties associated with the ancestors: a hare or a goose and a bear. In folklore these names appear usually with one anthropomorphic component – 'a man' or 'a woman' (Kulemzin, 2006).

Animals, amphibians, insects as personages usually include a common name of zoomorphic semantics.

Anglo-Saxon (examples of some animals and birds in the structure [as appellative] in Scandinavian anthroponyms):

Three most frequent zoomorphic components could be found in Anglo-Saxon anthroponyms: wulf, earn (eagle) and hun(d) (dog). The component –wulf was used in name formation most of all for the following reasons:

- scandinavian totemic belief about supernatural family relationship between people and a totem of a wolf;
- wolf was the animal of Odin (main God in Scandinavian mythology) (Belousov, 2010, p. 208).

- Dog and Eagle had also positive symbolic sense in Scandinavian mythology. Dog was treated as the first domesticated animal and a friend of a man. Usually Old Scandinavians interpreted dogs as symbols of loyalty, friendship, courage and watchfulness. Eagle was treated as a very beautiful bird that symbolized fauna, victory, courage, faith, power, nobility, greatness and grandeur (Belousov, 2010, p. 153).

Let us enumerate some anthroponyms with hun(d) and earn as components: Æðelhun (Æðelhund → æðelhund), Wulfhun (Wulfhund → wulfhund), Earnulf (Earnulf → earn wulf). As we see, these examples are very rare.

North American: Dena'ina - Qutsidghe'i'ina 'the Campfire people' (although this name includes an anthropomorphic component, the context provides information that these are animals "returning from the human people to be reincarnated" (Kalifornsky, 1991, p. 45).

Siberian:

Selkup – Pučo 'biver,' (Bykonina, 1996; Becker, 1978) represented as a wise creature who teaches how to behave appropriately in the taiga.

Khanty – Amp 'dog' could be considered as an important personage in the Khanty folklore – a friend (sometimes equal to a human) and the guard of a man. According to Khanty beliefs, the dog can communicate with the world of spirits and the dead (Filchenko, 2012, p. 241).

Birds as personages:

North American:

Dena'ina - Ggugguyni 'Raven'. The Den'ina stories describe Raven as a trickster and demiurge that can change his appearance to look like anything he wants, including persons (mostly masculine but also feminine – old grandma). Nut'aq'i 'goose': in one story described as a female, a young girl, a girlfriend of Raven (Kalifornsky, 1991:83-87; Kan, 1990).

Siberian:

Selkup – Pēge 'Hazel Grouse' (this personage was able to change his appearance transforming into a young man and also demonstrated shamanic functions of healing and recovering a dead person) (Skazki, 1996); Qarra 'Crane' (Becker, 1978).

Khanty – Kārəs 'a mythic bird', described as a creature similar to a gigantic eagle intelligent and able to speak human language; Luli 'Sandpiper', a personage in the myth about the origin of the earth, brought soil from the water during the flood; (Kulemzin, 2006).

Plants as personages:

North American:

Dena'ina - Ch'u 'Spruce'; Eseni 'Cottonwood' (these trees were described as persons without partners, the Spruce was covered with sores and filled with pus) (Kalifornsky, 1991, p. 79).

Supernaturals:

Anglo-Saxon:

Only a small group of *Anglo*-Saxon anthroponyms include elements that denote sacred and supernatural things. The name Woden (the main God in Scandinavian mythology) could be taken as a classic illustration. Such names as Osric (Os, God, deity, divine being), Ingild (derived from the name of a deity), Elfred (from Elf) are not so frequent (Ponomareva, 2008, p. 64).

Sacred components that form a basis for these names influenced greatly on the tradition of name formation. From the previous statement the following conclusions could be made:

- mythological worldview domination;
- themes of war and conquests were main and most important (Gorbacheva, 2008, p. 135-137).

Societies of hunters and gatherers demonstrate close ties between religion and folklore. Siberian and North American indigenous people preserved mythological elements of world perception, pre-scientific understanding of society and religion.

North American:

Tlingit – Ganook 'the Sitting One' (is considered to be the senior and the most ancient of all Tlingit deities. Myth attributes to Ganook the original power over the whole earth. There could be an etymological connection between

ganook and the verb “sits” (stem –nook). Ganook, according to myths, is an anthropomorphic creature. Yéil ‘Trickster, Raven’ is endowed with the ability to change his appearance constantly. Sometimes he is simply a raven whose name he is bearing, sometimes a human being, and sometimes he acts as an invisible spirit. His major pastime is changing from one appearance to another (Kan, 1990, p. 57).

Siberian:

Selkup - Nop ‘God, upper deity’ (etymologically connected with the word *nu meaning ‘upper part’; Lō/ Lōsi ‘evil spirit’ (this name is often modified by the words of location, natural phenomena, functions or spheres of influence and so on: elyallō ‘spirit of lower world, literally, ‘lower spirit’; čügyllōz ‘earth spirit’, mergiloz ‘wind spirit’; ötkyllōz ‘water spirit’; mačillōz ‘taiga spirit’; surullōz ‘hunting spirit’; n’ēnellōs ‘eider spirit’ (Kim, 1997, p. 121–126); ‘Lōs –ira ‘Davił-old man’; Košar ‘Mammoth, supernatural creature’.

Khanty -Torām – the highest selestial god. Although often presented in this meaning in Khanty folklore this term is polysemantic meaning ‘sky, top, upper part, universe, weather, nature, and time’. The compound name Num(i) torām ‘Supreme God’ is used in the areas adjacent to Selkups territories. The component num(i) reflects the idea of the vertical perception of the world. The name for the supreme deity in Khanty and Selkup has preserved both meanings: more ancient - spacial (top, upper part) and later developed under the influence of Christianity– religious (God). Mir sawittiχu ‘the Man Who looks around the World’ is a culture hero, the upholder of justice, the protector of people, a teacher and inventor of hunting and fishing methods (Kulemzin, 2006).

Luŋk, juŋk (Eastern Khanty); toŋχ (Southern Khanty) ‘a spirit’, in Khanty folk lore could be a personal name of the spirit, or it could be a part of a name as: Jeŋk Luŋk – ‘Water Spirit, Water King; Unttoŋχ – forest spirit, forest master, WatLuŋk (WotLuŋk – Eastern Khanty) – ‘Wind spirit’ (Kunina, 2005, p. 7, 26, 130).

Things as personages:

North American:

White River Sioux – We-Ota-Wichasha ‘Much-Blood Boy’, later known as Rabbit Boy, a personage that demonstrated a transformation from a thing to a human (Erdoes, 1998, p. 6).

Siberian:

Selkup – Lōsyttütyl’ palcallaka ‘Davił’s dung heap’. Informational field of this word combination in the folk lore context includes the following: appearance, anthropological features (ability to speak a human language), and functions (catches the main personage) (Kuznetsova, 1993).

Khanty - Joyəl’a bow’ is used in folklore as the instrument of magic prediction (Kulemzin, 2006). Narsjuχ (niŋjuχ) ‘Khanty musical instrument’ with some magic power that helped attract an elk (Lukina, 1990, p. 101).

Personal names:

Anglo-Saxon:

Such names as Ealhmund and Osmund are particularly interesting for linguistic interpretation. They could be treated as names-totems, names-wishes and names-guardian talismans or simply talismans. These names could be given to a person and the meaning of a name would protect him/her. Appellative – mund in its abstract meaning denote “protection”; that’s why people believe that Gods and deities would protect a person with this name (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English).

A person with this name as Scandinavian people believed would live a happy life, would be wise and would help other people to make proper decisions. Sometimes people with these names could be invited to solve a problem, to judge other people or to resolve/settle a conflict.

North American:

Hopi personal names “are totemic and ritualistic, reflect social structure and continuity, and have an independent expressive function as well. Some of these names – Yellow Fox Putting Up the Yellow Dawn Light, for example – are “tiny imagist poems,” Individually authored poetic compositions that comprise a literary genre.” (Kaplan & Bernays, 1999, p. 223–224).

Tlingit: Kitkukhinsi, i.e., daughter of a killer whale; Nashakiel [Naasshagiyéil] – literally “Raven at the head of Nass” (the name of the river) - the name of one great chief, the owner of this world (Kan, 1990, p. 58).

Siberian:

Selkup – Ī/Īj, Īča (and other dialect variants) – the name of a fabulous hero of Selkup epos, originated from the common noun “son”. This proper name is formed during the common Selkup period, before the split of the Selkup

ethnic group into two parts (Southern and Northern) at the end of the 18th century [see about the time of the split Helimski, 2000:36]. Nätänka, Tömnänka [Kuznetsova, 1993]. The first name derived from the common noun nätän 'girl', the second name derived from tömtä 'frog'. The connection with the noun "frog" signals that this personage has evil features. N'omal' Porqy 'Hare Coat' is a nick name of a Selkup hero who always wore such a coat (Kuznetsova, 1993). These proper names characterize Northern Selkups only as there are no such names in the Southern group. Qomtäl' pōtyr 'Golden shoe string' - the name of a husband of one of the main characters. This feature helped a girl make the right choice of a husband (Tuchkova, 2012). This proper name was coined in the Southern Selkup group.

Khanty – Alwäli – the most well-known proper name of a Khanty cultural hero, a mediator between humans and spirits, also known as Mir sawittiḡu. He is described as a rider on a white horse traveling around the world in the sky. He is also famous for his transformation into a goose (Kulemzin, 2006). Jaḡan Muv Iki 'River Land Man', As Muw Iki 'Ob land Man' (Uspenski, 2002); Polän qamt' rät' 'Nettle whip man' (Filchenko, 2013). The proper names often include a description that can provide additional information of a personage, like a function, location or personal characteristics.

Geographical names:

In myths and old folklore, geographical names were usually presented as generic names for natural objects, for example, Selkup: ed 'village', ky 'river', tō 'lake' noḡy 'creek' (Kuznetsova, 1993; Bykonja, 1996). Descriptive toponyms provide more specific information: Tūtyl' tō 'Carp Lake', N'aryl' Macy 'Red Forest, Russ 'Krasnosel'kup' – the name of a Selkup settlement; Nimyl' Qolty 'Yenisei' (lit. "Big Milk River"); Khanty: Juḡkjoḡanqanəḡnə "on the bank of the Devil's River"; Lapasjoḡanpuḡəlnə "in lapas river village" (Filchenko, 2013).

Anglo-Saxon (examples with hydronyms):

Old Germanic belief about Ginungagap (some kind of abyss that was treated as a living being). Ginungagap was the source of everything natural on the planet. In the center of this abyss was Niflheim (Dark World). The center of Niflheim was a symbolic source of all the rivers that also were treated as natural beings. Usually in Scandinavian mythology the names of the rivers were associated with something dark, cold, fierce or with different kinds of weapons, for example: Sweil (cold), Gunntra, Fierm (swift and cold), Fimbultr, Slid (fierce, violent), Gunntre, Fierm (swift), Hruth (storm), Vide (wide), Leith (lightning). All in all, linguists count eleven rivers with this etymology in Scandinavian myths (Gorbacheva, 2008, p. 214 – 224).

3. Conclusion

On the basis of analysis provided in this paper, the following findings could be drawn:

- in mythology and early folklore, there is no sharp border between common nouns and proper names. Common nouns can easily be transformed into proper names in specific contexts. In Siberian and North American examples, proper names are in the process of formation and are represented by common nouns of different categories. In Anglo-Saxon texts proper names are formed but the source is clear from the meaning of components derived from common nouns;
- proper names (personal and geographical) reveal lingual and cultural information adding specific meaning to mythological and folklore texts. Thus the informational field may include historical facts, time, location, categories and other details;
- functions of proper names in mythology are broader than just singling something or someone out and could be identified as informational, semantic, descriptive, and categorical;
- the formation of proper names could be identified as markers of folklore: in mythology personages are verbalized usually by common nouns; in folklore proper names are introduced.
- The stage of pre-proper names in mythology and folklore is universal.

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